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ABSTRACT

Developmental changes in the expression of contrast in child discourse were investigated. Contrast is defined as a psychological phenomenon and applied to the domain of discourse topics. The development of the ability to produce utterances that are topically related to the previous conversational turn is considered. Four types and three levels of expression of contrast are identified. The four types of expression of contrast are (1) comparison between two states, (2) denial of a previously asserted state, (3) substitution of one item for a previously mentioned item, and (4) challenge of an implicit suggestion. Three levels of expressing contrast are taking issue with the explicit content of a previous speech, challenging an implicit suggestion, and challenging the appropriateness of a previous speech. Twenty hours of videotaped interactions involving four children from the ages of two to five and containing 450 expressions of contrast were analyzed. Four developmental phases were identified that progressed from explicit expressions based on the immediately preceding linguistic context to expressions of contrast based on more implicit or hypothetical concerns. Numerous examples are presented. (RW)

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The Expression of Contrast in Child Discourse

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In the last several years, researchers in the field of child language have begun to carry out investigations of discourse topic and its maintenance and elaboration (Bloom, Rocissano and Hood, 1976; Foster, 1982; Foster, this volume; Keenan, 1974; Keenan and Schieffelin, 1976). These studies have found, for example, that children produce conversational turns that bear on the prevailing non-linguistic context before they are able to produce turns that are topically related to the previous turn of an interlocutor. And they have found that children's first utterances that are related to the prior linguistic context consist of 'horizontal' elaborations (e.g., the second half of adjacency pairs, or substitutions). Only later do elaborations reflect command of a 'hierarchically' organized discourse topic.

The aim of the present study was to examine developmental changes in the scope and organization of the discourse topic network. To do this, I have focussed on four types and three levels of expression of contrast.

I have started from a notion of contrast as a psychological function, which is applied to information or knowledge in domains of mental representation, including representations of our physical surroundings, and representations of the verbal exchanges we participate in. Such a function entails, quite generally, comparing two aspects or components of what we have in mind, and noting differences or incongruities. In this paper, I will report on changes in the application of this function to the domain of discourse topic.

The four types of expression of contrast I have distinguished are: (1)occasions where a speaker encodes a comparison between two states of affairs:

Sp1: This one's orange and that one's blue.

(2)occasions where a speaker negates or denies a state of affairs affirmed in the prior linguistic context:

Sp1: That's mine.
Sp2: No it's not.

(3)occasions where a speaker makes a substitution of some component of a state of affairs expressed in the prior linguistic context:

Sp1: Do you want milk?
Sp2: No, I want orange juice.

and finally, (4) occasions where a speaker challenges a proposition on the basis of what is entailed by or presupposed implicitly in the prior linguistic context:

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Sp1: Put your shoes on so we can go outside.
Sp2: But it's raining.

Further, I have distinguished three levels at which the speaker can express contrast. This was done to see how children operated on their topic network when they applied the contrast function. From looking at how the topic is operated on, it is possible to draw inferences about its contents and structure. Instances of the first level entailed applying the contrast function to components of the structure explicit in the prior utterance. In such cases, a speaker takes issue with the explicit propositional content of the previous turn.

Sp1: I'm gonna ride the bicycle.
Sp2: No, I am.

Instances of the second level entailed applying the contrast function to components of the topic that had not been made explicit in the prior discussion of the topic. In such cases, a speaker takes issue with something presupposed implicitly in the previous turn, or challenges it on the grounds of as yet unspoken considerations. The relevance of such a proposition to what has been said thus far in the conversation rests on the construction of bridges to fill in missing links, a discourse skill characteristic of adult communication (cf. Chafe, 1974, on the relationship between language and consciousness, and Fillmore, 1975, on the relationship between the mental representation surrounding an utterance and what is identified explicitly in it).

Sp1: I'm gonna write on the blackboard.
Sp2: But you don't have any chalk.

Instances of the third level reflected a more metalinguistic application of the contrast function, to the entire discourse network. In such cases, a speaker takes issue with the appropriateness of a given speaker turn on the grounds that it is incongruous with the (speaking and acting) roles of the participants in the activity at hand. Here, the discourse is treated as an integral part of the situation, and not simply as a product of it.

(Playing 'school', where the 'teacher', the subject,
asks the 'pupils', the other participants,
to name words beginning with particular letters)
Sp1 (a pupil): Tell me a word that begins with 'C'.
Sp2 (teacher): No, you're the children!

Based on existing studies of the development of topic maintenance, I expected to find the earliest expressions of contrast to be comparisons, negations and substitutions, expressed as paradigmatic variations on the explicit content of the previous utterance, i.e., primarily applications of contrast at the first level, and that challenges and

presuppositionally-based or more metalinguistic contrast (second and third levels) would only emerge later.

Methods

The data for this study come from 20 hours of videotaped naturalistic interaction filmed in home settings, between 4 children (overall age-span 2,4 to 5,2), their parents and siblings, and the research team. A total of 450 instances of the expression of contrast were analyzed. These were identified by their semantic and pragmatic content, as expressions of negation, comparison, substitution or challenge (see above), rather than solely by the presence of some predetermined set of surface markers (connective particles,adverbials or negation), which did not always appear explicitly in the children's talk.Several studies of the semantics and syntax of early complex sentences (Bloom , Lahey, Hood, Lifter, and Fiess, 1980; Eisenberg, 1980; Strage, in preparation) have found that the connective particles that mark contrast ('but', 'or', 'just', 'only', and so on) are absent at first and then undergo changes in meaning and range of application during the developmental period of concern here, and so it seemed inappropriate to use the presence of such markers as the only criterion for identifying instances of the expression of contrast.

Results

Four phases were identified in the development of the expression of contrast. Since once a particular type of contrast appeared, it generally survived and continued to appear in subsequent samples, the phases will be described in terms of what is newly acquired in each.

Phase I.

In the earliest samples, the expression of contrast consisted of explicit comparisons, denials or negations, or paradigmatic substitutions of some part of the propositional content of the immediately preceding linguistic context. Typically, such contrasts focussed on the agent of imminent activities, the possessor(s) of objects, or on properties that distinguished two objects:

(1) A 2,4 Mo:Why don't you pick that up and come over here?
A :No I don't.

(2) A 2,6 Mo:Do you want me to cut them up for you?
A :No, I want to cut them up.

(3) A 2,4 A :Dat's mine and dat's Teddy's.

(4) A 2,4 A :Dat's a orange one and dat's a
blue one.

The only instances where contrast focussed on something not marked explicitly in the prior utterance were cases where the child was objecting to something someone was doing as they spoke. It can be argued that these are instances of non-linguistic contingency, and that they are not motivated by the previous utterance, but by the events taking place at the time:

(5) A 2,4 Mo:(Giving A's toy to another child)
Careful.
A :Mine!

In any event, during this phase, contrasts always referred to aspects of the current situation.

Phase II

This next phase was characterized by three new developments. First, the expression of contrast began to transcend the 'here and now'. While one half of the contrast pair was still rooted in the prevailing context, the other half did not need to be. In these cases, the syntactic frame of the first half of the contrast was always retained in the second.

(6) A 3,1 A :I like to type but sometimes I don't
like to.

(7) A 3,1 A :She's not very long, but on this
picture she's very long.

The second development during this phase was the appearance of contrasts where the child took issue with inferences and assumptions underlying the prior utterance, and offered background information relevant to the propositional content of the previous utterance. These the earliest instances of non-parallel construction, and they were all referred to aspects of the prevailing physical context.

(8) S 2,11 M :(To researcher)Do it.
S :(To M)But he afraid.

(9) S 3,3 S :You could play with my wibble-wobble,
but it don't fall down.

(10) S 2,11 Re:Does it (airport) have a helicopter
with it?
S :No. It's a airport.

And finally, during this phase, the children began to express contrast with respect to who should speak when --the precursor to the third level of metalinguisitic contrast:

(11) A 3,1 A :(writing)How do you spell "Teddy"?
T :T-E-D-D-Y.
A :No, Mommy tell me.

Phase III

In this phase, the children began to express contrast based on normative assessments of the implications of the prior utterance. They were beginning to draw on their general, more decontextualized, world knowledge, as grounds for expressing contrast.

(12) S 3,10 Re:That's Albert Einstein. He didn't
do this kind of work. He worked
with his head.
S :He shouldn't do work with his head!

(13) M 3,10 M :Why did you put that up there?
Re:Well, I wanted it to be up there so
it couldn't get knocked over.
M :But that's not where it goes.

At this point, they began to be able to challenge faulty assumptions underlying the intent of the previous speaker's utterance.

(14) M 3,10 M :Are we having lunch now?
Mo:Why? Are you hungry?
M :No. Um, I just asked 'em if they
want to have lunch with us.

And at this point, the children also began to consider the appropriateness of a particular utterance to the role its speaker has assumed in the on-going activity:

(15) M 4,1 Mo:('pupil' at 'school')Tell me a word
that begins with 'C'.
M :No, you're the children!

Whereas earlier, they could only challenge who could do what physically (cf. example 2), or who should speak (cf. example 11), now they could challenge verbal transgressions of roles.

Phase IV

In this last phase, the children could move freely from the 'here-and-now' to other possible worlds and back, basing their comparisons and challenges on future or hypothetical states of affairs, or inferences about them.

(16) T 5,2 T :Right now I'm drawing a Christmas tree, but though when I'm done with the whole thing, it'll be a city.

(17) T 5,2 T :But if we don't want to use the bath-tub water (to water the lawn), then the sprinklers, tonight, so we would have to use the sprinklers then.

(18) T 5,2 Mo:We're gonna have to get her back to get that off.
T :But maybe it's too hard -tight for her to get it off.

They were able to talk about why a particular proposal wouldn't work, alluding to states of affairs that made the proposal untenable, and questioning the soundness of the reasoning that had led the interlocutor to make their proposal:

(19) M 4,5 Re:(to S)Why don't you read the book to Lizzy, Simon?
M :He (Simon) doesn't know the words.

(20) T 4,4 Mo:Brooms do not go under the fridge. Now that's not what I got the marble out with the other day, was it?
T :No, but the marble's way back over there.

(21) M 4,9 Fa:Would you sit down in the red-topped chair (Fa's chair)?
M :Well then where are you gonna sit?

(22) T 5,2 Mo:The fire alarm didn't do much good, did it? That's supposed to warn people to get out of the house.
T :But then how did the fireman squirt it out?

And finally, during this last phase, the children's expression of

contrast reflected the presence of a whole network of knowledge that could be brought to bear on meeting the discourse demands at hand. In the final example, the child has recognized that some additional information was being called for, but that he could not provide exactly what was being asked for. He could, however, offer something else. The bridge involved contrasting what he didn't know with what he did, in such a way as to make what he did know relevant to the topic.

(23) T 4,4 T :I'm going someplace soon.
Re:Where are you going?
T :Primary.
Re:What's that?
T :I don't know, but I'm coming back in night time.

Discussion

In sum, then, the analysis of the expression of contrast revealed several general trends in the development of discourse skills and topic structure.

First, there was a change from always preserving parallel structure across conversational turns and propositions (e.g. paradigmatic substitutions) to drawing on a greater network, and not carrying the structural frame of the first proposition over into the second. This correlated with the children's ability to base their contrasts on inferences and implicit assumptions (second and third level contrasts) once they could incorporate into their discourse more general world knowledge, not necessarily represented in the immediate context.

Second, there was a reversion to parallel structure for early contrasts that transcended the 'here-and-now'. During Phase II, while contrasts focussing on referents in the current context were no longer restricted to paradigmatic substitution frames, those that drew on conditions not in the prevailing physical context were. This may reflect some sort of decalage, whereby the more cognitively complex accessing of states of affairs removed from the present context, and contrasting them with states of affairs that are a part of the present context, is possible only if the child uses the structure of one half of the contrast pair as a frame for the second (cf. examples 6 and 7).

Third, there was a stable concern with agency (cf. examples 2, 8, 11, and 15), with who could do what, that with time came to include the case of who could do what by their words. These last cases reveal that the child was beginning to treat the discourse as part of and not just a reflection of the ongoing activity.

At this point, I would like to suggest two directions for future research, to extend the analysis of the expression of contrast. First, the present study has focussed on children's productions. One way to further the analysis of children's inference-making capabilities would be to compare the sorts of inferences they are able to <u>produce</u> with the sorts of inferences and presuppositions they are able to <u>comprehend</u>. This sort of question requires addressing the child's ability to

entertain an interlocutor's perspective, and as such, should contribute to discussions of the relationship between cognitive and linguistic growth.

A second direction to pursue stems from the pragmatic force of the 'challenge' types of contrast. Currently, several researchers (e.g., Susan Ervin-Tripp and her colleagues) are investigating children's uses of and responses to control acts (directives, requests and prohibitions). One might expect that the earliest and most sophisticated presuppositionally-based arguments appear in high-cost or high-potential-benefit control act contexts, such as justifications of non-compliance or mitigations or aggravations of requests. That is, we might find that underlying presuppositions are first worked out in the context of these salient types of routine interchanges, and then understood in more neutral, and unstructured contexts. This would be analogous to the development of hierarchical topic elaborations during well-practiced, scaffolded routines (cf. Foster, this volume). Such a finding would also be analogous to what Ervin-Tripp (1977) has termed 'bursts of syntax' in situations of high communicative motivation, in describing exceptionally long and complex utterances.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that the expression of contrast in child discourse constitutes a promising domain of inquiry. I hope to have shown that it holds many clues to the child's representation of discourse topic, a network which integrates the organization of linguistic competence, social awareness, and conceptual sophistication.

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Footnote

*For all examples from the data, 'A', 'S', 'T', and 'M' refer to children in the study, 'Mo' and 'Fa' to their mothers and fathers, respectively, and 'Re' to the researcher.

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